

Description

Mount Rainier National Park is located in west-central Washington, on the western slope of the Cascade Range and encompasses 236,381 acres within the authorized, legislated park boundary. An additional 140 acres lie outside the current boundary near the Carbon River entrance. The park's northern boundary is approximately 65 miles southeast of the Seattle-Tacoma metropolitan area and 65 miles west of Yakima. The elevations of the park extend from about 1,700 feet above sea level to 14,410 feet at the summit of Mount Rainier.

The focal point of the park is a towering, snow- and ice-covered volcano, which is a prominent landmark in the Pacific Northwest. The base of the volcano spreads over an area of about 100 square miles. The 26 major glaciers on the mountain cover 35 square miles, constituting the largest single-mountain glacial system in the contiguous 48 states. Mount Rainier is also the second most seismically active and the most hazardous volcano in the Cascade Range.

The park's rugged, precipitous topography consists mainly of peaks and valleys. The flanks of the mountain are drained by five major rivers and their tributaries. The mountain's summit towers 9,000 to 11,000 feet above valley floors only three to six miles away. Besides the glaciers, other water resources in the park include 470 mapped rivers and streams, 382 mapped lakes and ponds, more than 3,000 acres of wetland, numerous waterfalls, and mineral springs.

The park's vegetation is diverse, reflecting the varied climatic and environmental conditions encountered across the park's 12,800-foot elevation gradient. More than 960 vascular plant species and more than 260 nonvascular plant species have been identified in the park. Mount Rainier also provides habitat for many wildlife species, including approximately 300 species of native birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish.

In addition to its natural wonders, the national park has a long history of human activities. The area was used by American Indians for hunting and gathering, as well as for spiritual and ceremonial purposes. In the early 1900s miners, climbers, and tourists, among others, came into the area. The establishment of the park, and subsequent planning and development for visitor use and landscape protection, constitutes an important chapter in the development of the American park idea. As a result, Mount Rainier National Park has rich and diverse cultural resources, including prehistoric and historic archeological resources, historic structures, and cultural landscapes.

Congress recognized the special nature of Mount Rainier when it established the area as a national park on March 2, 1899. It was the nation's fifth national park. In 1963, the approximately 210-acre outlying Tahoma Woods area was set aside for park and visitor support facilities. In 2004, Congress authorized an 800-acre expansion in the Carbon River area for conservation and recreation purposes. Congress also recognized the wilderness values of the park and, in 1988, designated about 97% of the park as the Mount Rainier Wilderness.

Most developed areas in the park are of national significance and are included in the comprehensive Mount Rainier National Historic Landmark District, which was designated in 1997. The Mount Rainier National Historic Landmark District sets Mount Rainier National Park apart as the best and most complete example of the conception and idea of the American national park as it was embodied and implemented through the master planning of the early 20th century.

Volunteers and partnerships with public, private, and nonprofit groups for education, scientific research, and stewardship of park resources are integral to achieving the purpose of Mount Rainier National Park. The park maintains a wide variety of partnerships in support of its purpose and mission and cultivates new partnerships when appropriate and feasible.

As a large protected area that has served as a local, national, and international destination for more than 100 years, Mount Rainier National Park is integral to the economic and environmental health of the surrounding communities and the region.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE • U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



Foundation Document Overview

Mount Rainier National Park

Washington



Contact Information

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Purpose



The purpose of MOUNT RAINIER NATIONAL PARK is to protect and preserve unimpaired the majestic icon of Mount Rainier, a glaciated volcano, along with its natural and cultural resources, values, and dynamic processes. The park provides opportunities for people to experience, understand, and care for the park environment, and also provides for wilderness experiences and sustains wilderness values.



Significance

Significance statements express why Mount Rainier National Park resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- At a height of 14,410 feet, Mount Rainier is the highest volcanic peak in the contiguous United States, has the largest alpine glacial system in the contiguous 48 states, and the world's largest volcanic glacier cave system. Visible throughout the region, Mount Rainier shapes the physical environment, inspires the human experience, and defines the identity of the Pacific Northwest.
- As part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, Mount Rainier is an outstanding example of Cascade volcanism. Mount Rainier's eruptions and mudflows continue to shape the area and are a continuing threat to park visitors, employees, infrastructure, and surrounding lowland communities.
- Mount Rainier protects the headwaters of five major watersheds that originate in the park's glaciers and are an important source of water for the Puget Sound region. It reaches up into the atmosphere to disturb great tides of eastward moving Pacific maritime air, resulting in spectacular cloud formations, prodigious amounts of rain, and record-setting snowfalls.
- Mount Rainier National Park is a vital remnant of the once widespread primeval Cascade ecosystem and provides habitat for many species representative of the region's flora and fauna. The park preserves a diverse mosaic of mid-to high-elevation ecological communities and contains outstanding examples of diverse vegetation communities and dependent organisms, ranging from old-growth forest to subalpine meadows and ancient heather.
- Mount Rainier National Park protects more than 97% of its area as federally designated wilderness. Particularly as urban and rural development expands, the park increases in importance to the region, the nation, and the world as a large island of protected open space where ecosystem processes dominate and opportunities for wilderness recreation, including solitude, are available to a growing and diverse population.

- Mount Rainier National Park contains an extensive archeological record demonstrating more than 9,000 years of human connection to the mountain. The resources of the park continue to provide material, spiritual, and cultural sustenance to contemporary descendent tribes, including the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe, the Puyallup Tribe of Indians, the Nisqually Indian Tribe, the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, the Squaxin Island Tribe, and the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation.
- The developed areas of Mount Rainier contain some of the nation's best examples of intact National Park Service Rustic style architecture and naturalistic landscape architecture of the 1920s and 1930s. The Mount Rainier National Historic Landmark District is considered to be the most complete and best preserved example of NPS master planning in the first half of the 20th century.
- Mount Rainier is a living laboratory that offers opportunities for scientists and students to study and develop a deeper understanding of, as well as foster an appreciation for, the park, its resources, processes, and meanings. Because of its great elevational range and extensive glacial systems, Mount Rainier's geology, hydrology, ecological communities, and historic infrastructure are acutely sensitive to climate change impacts, offering an exceptional opportunity to observe and understand the effects of climate change and demonstrate climate change response in the national park system.
- Mount Rainier offers recreational and educational opportunities in a wide range of scenic settings, including wildflower meadows, glaciers, and old growth forests, all in a relatively compact area that is easily accessed by a large urban population. The park's terrain and weather conditions offer world-class climbing opportunities that have tested the skills of climbers for more than a century.



Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Mount Rainier and its associated geologic and glacial features**
 - **Dynamic landscape-scale processes**
 - **Biological diversity that contributes to the integrity of the Cascade ecosystem**
 - **Mount Rainier Wilderness values and experiences**
 - **Year-round access to a range of high-quality recreational experiences from the wild and challenging to the indoor and refined**
 - **Natural sounds and dark night skies**
 - **Mount Rainier National Historic Landmark District**
 - **Archeological record that documents more than 9,000 years of human connection with the land and sustains a living connection to the park for contemporary descendant tribes**
 - **Clean air, scenic vistas, and viewsheds**
 - **Opportunities to understand Mount Rainier's resources and heritage**
 - **Opportunities for first-hand observation, scientific research, and learning**
 - **Curatorial collections**
- Mount Rainier National Park contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.
- **Heritage of climbing and mountaineering on Mount Rainier**
 - **Mount Rainier's place in the development and legacy of the national park system**
 - **Opportunities to understand the effects of climate change**